What is neo-conservation?

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'If life has the right to life, then nature's life is no less than human life.'

Abstract: Neo-conservation draws on multidisciplinary insights from beyond current conservation biology: from Capitaloceneists (e.g. Moore 2016), Critical Theory (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) and political science (e.g. Biro 2011) to integrate themes of capitalism – being the world-ecology of state capital; eradicating of all forms of domination, and recognising that all ecologies are in essence critical ecologies. Neo-conservation's future cannot mirror the present since it represents a reconfigured relationship *in* nature.

Key words: neo-conservation, Capitalocene, Critical Theory, domination, critical ecologies, conservation *praxis*, world-making, spaces and places, world-ecology.

1. Introduction

Efforts to conceptualise and describe what neo-conservation is, is not easy. Some would even say it is irresponsible because after all, simple every-day logic tells us intuitively what it really is. For instance, which spatial extents and which biological level of life needs to be conserved remain unanswered because it does not 'provide a consistent systematization of moral decision making (Brennan in Callicott and Frodeman: 372–381). Nevertheless, the interconnectedness of life's complexities continues to take place in contested places and spaces (Lefebvre 2012) through processes of worldmaking (Goodman 1978) after our own image. Essentially, humans do this to survive. In doing so, they want to escape from all forms of domination but in reality perpetuate domination. Neo-conservation *praxis* – *praxis* being how we *think* and *do* – gains from what the early founding fathers of Critical Theory wanted to do (Horkheimer and Adorno) – to eradicate domination.

2. Five fundamentals of neo-conservation

Neo-conservation is **interdisciplinary** in approach and methodology. It argues that an interdisciplinary approach to conservation challenges, yields more productive results than the traditional division of scientific conservation labour into neatly packaged specialisms. Suffice to make this point as follows: '[c]onservation problems span several disciplines. Effective resolution of conservation problems require professionals to think across disciplines rather than along strict disciplinary lines' (Touval and Dietz 1994: 902), whilst for others '[w]e need to work together, or

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even 'leap together', across traditional disciplinary frontiers or polemical stances, in order to find innovative solutions that counter the prevailing ideological divide separating economies and ecology' (Aronson *et al.* 2006: 260–263).

A fundamental thesis of neo-conservation (Engelbrecht 2016a: 1–17) is the acceptance that we today live in the geological time of **the Capitalocene** (Moore in Moore 2016: 1–13; 78–114; Parenti in Moore 2016: 166–184) that succeeded the Holocene. An overriding characteristic of contemporary human behaviour is that human production efforts and consumption behaviour is in access of what planet Earth in the long run can sustain. The focus is no longer on the traditional 'modes of production' interpretation but rather 'scope of consumption. It turns popular beliefs about human needs and human wants on its head, simply because such over-use behaviour – production and consumption in order to live – threatens life. Similarly, Mark Colyvan (2007) argues that the related philosophical issues of the above extend beyond environmental ethics.

The threats to life are the results of what is considered as one of the fundamental principles of **Critical Theory** of the Frankfurt School, namely, domination. Critical theorists want to do away with of all forms of domination by humans over one another and over nature as well as humans being subjected by nature. More specifically, Horkheimer and Adorno 'wanted to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2012: xiv).

The consequence of the over-use of domination (e.g. state-sponsored illegal economy, because of its over-use of political power) leads to over-use of other scarce resources (domination being only one of the many scarce resources) to the extent that the unabated rate and uncontrolled scope of destruction of ecologies (e.g. environmental-unfriendly mining activities), portray all ecologies as **critical ecologies** (Biro 2011).

In order to pay back this ecological debt, we need to reverse tendencies through **proactive** neo-conservation *praxis*. For the purposes of this article, the above five themes (interdisciplinary approach, Capitalocene, domination, critical ecologies, and pro-activeness) are the cornerstones for an analytic category to explain what neo-conservation is. We have already noted above that neo-conservation asks questions about more than the degradation of nature, or that capital as a process, is the cause of all biospheric problems, or that all forms of domination needs to be eradicated, or lastly, that we need to conserve more because all ecologies are critical ecologies that face extinction. For instance, neo-conservation takes note of when or not to 'pursue de-extinction, calculating the conservation cost and benefits are not enough. It is also necessary to access the ethical arguments for and against it' (Sandler 2017). For this reason, neo-conservation accepts the principle (after Moore in Moore 2016: 6) of Capitaloceneists that capitalism is a particular manner in which nature is organized in a dominated form – one that *is* a capitalist 'world-ecology' of multi-species'. This suggests that neo-conservation needs to operate in a noöspheric environment, one that no longer sees capitalism as a closed social system that has no relationship with humans, but rather that neo-conservation *is* the

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system and *is* the relationship with humans and non-humans alike. This difference is this: in traditional thinking capital has a non-relationship disposition relative to ecologies. The result is that ecologies have become critical because they face extinction. Since neo-conservation *is* that relationship, it sees all ecologies as critical ecologies. The former (traditional thinking) is reactive, post-event and as a result of. The latter (neo-conservationists) see proactive, pre-emptive and already pre-event mitigation built-in human *praxis* – not as an after-event built *into*. Neo-conservation does not wait to react on a bad event that has happened or is happening, instead neo-conservation is already future human *praxis* built into it. In this sense, neo-conservationists regard the present as history. One manner in which neo-conservation has already the future in-built, is through realizing that it needs to take a strategic turn *away from having to conserve more*, to a *praxis* of conserving less – not having to conserve less, but conserving less.

Traditional conservation *praxis* treats environmental deformation *as a result of*, hence *the needs for*. Neo-conservation, on the other hand, supports thinking about *human based change* as opposed to *human driven change*. The implication is that instead of treating nature as having some kind of value, *nature is value* and hence view shifts away from waste-management (being reactive) to emphasis of non-waste management as the appropriate *praxis*. For this reason neo-conservation does not refer to the conservation of the world or to the ecologies in the world, instead, *it is world-conservation and world-ecological*. Neo-conservation does not make a distinction between two worlds – the human and non-human worlds. It prefers to explore thinking that could bring human values and environmental ethics closer together. The aim is to narrow the divide between intrinsic value of biodiversity and anthropogenic value systems. In so-doing, neo-conservation is more than an extension of ethical human behaviour.

Yet, because neo-conservation *praxis* functions within the sphere of the capitalist state as landlord of the contested spaces and places as the world-ecology of capitalism, it competes for scarce resources in the state-controlled politics of spaces. On the one hand neo-conservation contests budgets for the authoritative allocation of scarce resources, but on the other, it is caught up in the contradiction of production-consumption-value (profit) triad. To consume less, does not alleviate pressure from the production-profit relationship. In reality, these three pillars of capital cannot function properly without them all being in place.

3. Conclusion

Neo-conservation proposes conservation answers by extending its investigation beyond environmental ethics and argues that conservation problems stem from science. Neo-conservation solutions however, are probably best arrived at when scientists and philosophers work together – on at least the five proposed building blocks of neo-conservation.

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